

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY-BELLEVUE MEDICAL CENTER
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF MEDICINE
477 FIRST AVENUE, NEW YORK 16, N.Y.

DEPARTMENT OF PHARMACOLOGY

OREGON 9-3200

August 19, 1954

Dr. Joshua Lederberg
Marine Biological Laboratory
Woods Hole, Mass.

Dear Joshua:

Enclosed is a copy of the famous letter for your signature, together with Harry Eagle's reply to my inquiry. I have taken the liberty of accepting his suggestion and deleting our fifth paragraph. If you would like to handle this paragraph in any other way don't hesitate to let me know; Beate says she won't mind typing it once more.

I'm sorry Eagle didn't send us a copy of his letter, but in its absence I would assume that our letter contains material that Eagle had not covered, and that would still be worth calling to the Editor's attention. Besides, it would be a shame to discard all the man-hours that went into this creation!

I'm all ^{unruffled} rapt up with such nasty jobs as packing the lab and finishing the review; how I wish I could still be at Woods Hole.

Best regards to Esther.

Sincerely,



Bernard D. Davis

P.S.

Please let me know when you have sent this off as I would then like to send copies to Kurt Stern, Ubell, and a couple of other people.

The Editor
The New York Times
New York 36, N. Y.

Dear Sir:

The problem of informing the public on scientific matters is as important to scientists as to newsmen; but regrettably these two groups have not always achieved mutual confidence. We would like to call to your attention an article that illustrates one source of the difficulty. This article, which appeared in The New York Times of June 10, 1954, described a symposium at Rutgers University which the writers attended.

The article began: "Strong evidence for the inheritance of acquired characteristics was reported here today." After this far-reaching statement, it then referred to the paper of Dr. Harry Eagle on drug resistance in bacteria. What Dr. Eagle actually stated was the following: 1) There has been irrefutable evidence that in many cases drug resistance arises by spontaneous mutation. 2) There has so far been no clear-cut case of inherited "learning" of drug resistance (i.e., inheritance of an acquired characteristic), some indications from his own previous experiments being conceded to be indecisive. 3) However, experiments in progress may still lead to substantiation of the "learning" theory in a few examples of drug resistance that have not yet been fully clarified.

This is scarcely "strong evidence for the inheritance of acquired characteristics."

In a second error studies with radioactive antibiotics on unrelated, biochemical aspects of drug resistance were incorrectly linked by your reporter to the genetic controversy.

The exaggeration of Dr. Eagle's claim then led the reporter to a lengthy discussion of "the Russian concept of genetics" and the "observation" that "Western scientists were in the anomalous position of having to hold that the Russian concept is wrong although experimental evidence seems to suggest that it is right."

We are particularly disturbed that this "observation" was incorrectly attributed, by inference, to Dr. Eagle. Furthermore, we are concerned by the statement itself, which seriously questions the intellectual freedom of American scientists by implying that an official genetic doctrine exists here as well as in Russia. While we, too, are worried about the increasing pressures on intellectual freedom here, and welcome the Times' concern for it, this editorial indictment seems far too grave to be presented so lightly in a news report.

In addition, in our view the "dilemma for scientists" implied in your reporter's statement (and featured in the headline) would not be real even if exceptional cases of inheritance of acquired characteristics were to be proved. Modern genetics does not exclude the possibility of such deviations from the fundamental pattern of Mendelian inheritance. In contrast, the official Russian doctrine does more than stress the inheritance of acquired characteristics; it totally rejects modern genetic theory and largely ignores the innumerable verifiable experiments on which this theory is based.

We appreciate the need to add background material in making an effective news report out of a scientific contribution. Nevertheless, it seems self-evident that the material added by the reporter should be clearly distinguished from that provided by the scientist; and the scientist's statement should not be distorted for purposes of relating it to issues of wide popular interest.

We are sure you agree that despite the special problems of science news reporting this newspaper department should adhere to the same standards of accuracy as the others. We would welcome your comments on how the difficulties illustrated by the present case might be avoided.

Yours sincerely,

Bernard D. Davis, M.D.
Chairman, Dept. of Pharmacology
New York University College
of Medicine

Joshua Lederberg, Ph.D.
Professor of Genetics
University of Wisconsin

P.S.

Dr. Eagle has seen a copy of this letter and verified our summary of his statements.

cc: R. K. Plumb